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# **Bibliotherapeutic Literature: A Key Facet of Whole Language Instruction For The At-Risk Student**

**Dan T. Ouzts**

Literature is the creative product of the minds of creative people. As a painting serves to fire the imagination, so does a fine story, a well-composed poem, or a good book (Smith, 1975). Literature is not a subject that should be taught but one that should be read and enjoyed. It is through literature that children develop interests and pleasure in reading. Moreover, literature stirs the imagination and creativity of children instead of destroying their interests. These are the basic foundations of lifelong learning (McMillan and Gentile, 1988).

Literature reflects the society, culture, and views of those authors who write the literature. The 1970s brought the first ripples of the tidal wave of literature in reading and writing instruction in schools and the wave began to peak in the 1980s (Savage, 1994). Educators began to critically examine skill development approaches to literacy and the appeal of using real books by real authors. Children's literature began to achieve a greater prominence as part of literacy instruction. In today's literature a movement away from the traditional fairy tales has occurred and more real-life situations are being presented (Ouzts, 1991). Contemporary trends are presented in much of

the literature and one needs only to examine the content of many concept books to find issues such as adoption, AIDS, alcoholism, Alzheimer's disease, blindness, day care, divorce, Downs Syndrome, latchkey children, and even nuclear war (Whitman, 1993). It appears that the field of literature is reflecting societal changes in that many books are now concentrating on various issues and these same issues are introspective-based. If one were to pinpoint the birth of the new realism in young adult literature, the year would be 1967 (Nilsen and Donelson, 1993). Nine books (see Figure 1) appear to be the groundbreaking novels which brought a new realism to literature and the teaching of literature.

Caring, competent and knowledgeable educators fully appreciate how authentic interactions with literature can contribute to overall cognitive and affective growth (Jalongo, 1983). The reading teacher occupies a strategic position in the development of emotions of children, and it is through this development that the teacher is able to help shape the future of children who are experiencing stress and crises in their lives. As educators we must sensitize children to themselves and to others through books. Books may offer possible solutions to problems or even present the solution that could lessen a person's inner turmoil and thus break many attitudinal barriers to learning. This therapy through a literature approach is bibliotherapy.

The word *bibliotherapy* first appeared in 1930 in an article by G.O. Ireland. Another term applied to this type of therapy was *therapeutic reading*. In the United States, Drs. Will and Karl Menninger were among the first to foster an interest in this type of aid to healing (O'Bruba and Camplesse, 1983). The strategy of bibliotherapy can serve as an adjunct to learning for many children and concomitantly serve as an adjunct to teaching for the reading educator or reading teacher. It

appears that bibliotherapy is emerging as a discipline in the reading field, as evidenced by research being conducted (Ouzts, 1991).

**Figure 1**

***Early bibliotherapeutic novels for middle-graders***

Armstrong, W. (1969). *Souder*. An historical novel about a poverty-stricken black family of tenant farmers. NY: Harper and Row.

Bradford, R. (1968). *Red Sky at Morning*. Southerner Josh Arnold and his mother go to a little town in New Mexico where they wait out the Second World War and Josh gains an understanding of himself. NY: Pocket Books.

Cleaver, R., & Cleaver, B. (1969). *Where the Lilies Bloom*. Set in the Tennessee mountains, 14 year-old Mary Call struggles to keep her orphaned brothers and sisters together after they have secretly buried their father. Philadelphia PA: Lippincott.

Cormier, R. (1974). *The Chocolate War*. With the advent of this novel in 1974, it appears that the problem novel has arisen. NY: Dell.

Donovan, J. (1969). *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*. Davy, who has lived with his grandmother, has to move to New York to live with an alcoholic mother that he hardly knows and certainly does not understand. NY: Harper.

Head, A. (1967). *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*. An unmarried girl who gets pregnant. NY: New American Library.

Hinton, S.E. (1967). *The Outsiders*. A story about non-white lower socioeconomic children who did not fit the typical society model. NY: Viking.

Thompson, J. (1967). *House of Tomorrow*. An unmarried girl goes into a home for unwed mothers. NY: Harper and Row.

Zindel, P. (1968). *The Pigman*. An alienated boy and girl make friends with a lonely old man who can't admit that his wife has died. NY: Bantam.

Tillman (1984) reviewed nine research studies on bibliotherapy and concluded that careful planning for length of treatment is required and that the identification, catharsis, and insight explanation of how bibliotherapy works needs to be verified. More recently, the concept of bibliotherapy has encompassed everything from literature used in counseling prisoners to sharing a picture book on peer acceptance with preschoolers (Jalongo, 1983).

Affective learning is one of the most important and controversial purposes of education (Beane, 1986). According to Beane, *affect* refers to those aspects of human nature and conduct having to do with emotions, feelings, values, attitudes, predisposition, and morals. Beane believes that basic issues over affective education need to be resolved if this essential aspect of schooling is to rise above ambiguity and ambivalence. It appears that the basic issue in the use of bibliotherapy is one of whether or not children should read books about crises which they may be experiencing and whether or not reading about these crises will influence attitudinal and motivational adjustment. Although teachers may be reluctant to become involved and may even feel uncomfortable in supplying books which could be termed controversial, it would appear that sensitivity to others' needs will be recognized and even enhanced. Perhaps this sensitivity will make the needed difference in children's motivations and attitudes, if and when crises arise. Although research data on bibliotherapy are inconclusive, the mere fact of the reading teacher knowing that children are experiencing some type of stress and crisis and that adjustment in instruction may need to be made may make a difference in further motivational and attitudinal problems for many children. Intervention through a book's approach may make the difference between an emotionally well-adjusted person and one who may later develop mental anguish.

Many recent books for children deal with serious issues and the number of books appropriate for bibliotherapy has grown rapidly. *The Book Finder: A Guide to Children's Literature About the Needs and Problems of Youth Aged 2-15* by Dreyer (1989) is an excellent source of information. *The Book Finder* consists of four volumes and lists books by subject or problem area, author, and title. Another source is *A Guidebook for Bibliotherapy* (Schultheis, 1972). Selected readings in this book include those of the problems of appearance, physical handicaps, sibling rivalry, broken and unhappy homes, economic insecurity, and many others. Also recommended are the Children's Choices, Young Adult Choices, and Teachers' Choices published by the International Reading Association. Results of an examination of the 1990-1993 choices are shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
*International Reading Association*  
*Books published for middle readers*

	# of titles	# of titles that can be used for bibliotherapy
<b>1990</b>		
Children's choices	111	17
Young adult choices	29	10
Teachers' choices	30	11
<b>1991</b>		
Children's choices	111	17
Young adult choices	28	11
Teachers' choices	30	8
<b>1992</b>		
Children's choices	124	10
Young adult choices	30	15
Teachers' choices	36	7
<b>1993</b>		
Children's choices	100	2
Young adult choices	32	8
Teachers' choices	36	3

It is evident that society has changed. And, too, so have the children and the teachers. Educators are recognizing the critical need for delivering literacy instruction to at-risk and homeless children and their families (IRA, 1990). Four books which may be used for homeless children and their families are *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991), *The Polka Dot Horse* (Thiel, 1992), *Homelessness* (Seymour-Jones, 1993), and *Changing Places — A Kid's View of Shelter Living* (Chalofsky, Finland, and Wallace, 1992). The role of the reading teacher cannot be ignored in terms of crisis intervention, and the amelioration or attitudes can be a legitimate cause in using bibliotherapy. The role of the reading teacher should be viewed as that very special person who can break emotional barriers to learning when crises arise.

Manning and Manning (1984) have stated that bibliotherapy has been found to be an effective therapeutic device for young readers confronting various personal problems. They state that an estimated 15 million school-aged youngsters have a parent who suffers from alcoholism. While most children of alcoholics usually experience difficulties admitting they need help, a teacher's intervention through an objective, non-threatening book may be more successful than a direct personal approach. Four books which can be used for children of alcoholics are *Sometimes My Mom Drinks Too Much* (Kenny and Krull, 1980), *Laughter in the Background* (Dorman, 1980), *Cages of Glass, Flowers of Time* (Culin, 1979), and *Now is Not Too Late* (Howland, 1980).

Child abuse is currently receiving much attention at the national, state, and local levels. Even though children may be abused and neglected and may not even know they are victims, they tend to remain silent among their peers and teachers. Many teachers may even avoid getting involved with departments of social services for legal reasons if they suspect

abuse or neglect. Watson (1979) suggests that fiction and literature can affect to some degree the coping behavior of children and effective teachers can involve students with literature which may be similar in content to their actual experiences. From reading the material students may gain insight into personal problems and may perhaps find a remedy for their problem. In a study conducted by Carter and Harris (1982) those characteristics which make a book popular were analyzed and students gave their reasons for favoring a certain title. Characterization was mentioned most as that quality of a book which made it popular. The students frequently asserted that a character in a book was "just like me." This suggests that self-identification is of paramount importance in providing books to children who have emotional barriers to learning.

Another problem which may affect children's attitudes and reading achievement in our classrooms is divorce. An estimated 12 million American children have been affected by divorce and Monteith (1981) suggests that teachers need to watch for specific kinds of stress as nervousness, weariness, moodiness, declining grades, physical complaints, and acting out. When children view themselves as failures, they develop irrational ideas about their worth and abilities. In addition to important tasks they have been unable to perform, they self talk themselves into a corner of ugliness, ineptitude, and unpopularity on many dimensions. These negative self-statements become a broken record that plays over and over. Anxiety sets in and the affected individuals become their worst enemies. Growth and development have ended for these children.

While affective education continues to be viewed as part of the soft side of the curriculum, it is theoretically and practically worthwhile for us to understand that *affective*

education is a necessary condition for *effective* education (Beane, 1986). While accountability in education is important, it seems that we need to satisfy the goals of educators who value the equally important and subjective reasons of breaking emotional barriers to learning. Growth through reading is the ultimate goal of reading instruction while growth in reading is a means to that end. America's social maladies — deprivation, crime, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy — cannot be wished away nor lectured away (Goldstein, 1989). Much of our literature is reflecting social issues and problems which are introspective-based and real. We now read about real people who have real problems and often these problems are ones which impede learning, adjustment, social interaction, and possibly academic achievement. The problems of divorce, drug abuse, AIDS, homelessness, and alcoholism are problems which are receiving much emphasis in the bibliotherapeutic literature. These problems will continue to be real issues in the classrooms.

Reading teachers are in strategic positions to break many emotional barriers to learning. It is important that the reading teacher be aware of the literature which can be used in the classroom. Fifty-five topics with related bibliotherapeutic literature are presented to assist the classroom teacher (see Appendix). It would appear that to the teacher who is willing to work within the framework of a normal classroom to develop character, attitudes, and self-worth, bibliotherapy would be worth a try. Bibliotherapeutic literature should be a component of any reading program for at-risk students.

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## APPENDIX

### Abandonment

Voigt, C. *Dacey's song*.

Hermes, P. *Mama, let's dance*

### Abuse

Byars, B. *Cracker Johnson; The pinballs*

### Adolescents in charge

LaFarge, P. *Abby takes over*

Sachs, M. *The bears' house*

Cleaver, V. *The mimosa tree*

Clymer, E. *My brother Stevie*

### Adoption

Okimoto, J.D. *Molly by any other name*

Girard, L. *Adoption is for always; We adopted you, Benjamin Koo*

### AIDS

White, R. *Ryan White: My own story*

Jordan, M.K. *Losing Uncle Tim*

Girard, L. *Alex, the kid with AIDS*

### Alcoholism

Vigna, J. *I wish Daddy didn't drink so much*

Krull, K.K., & Krull, H. *Sometimes my mom drinks too much*

### Allergies

Delton, J. *I'll never love anything ever again*

### Alzheimer's Disease

Delton, J., & Tucker, D. *My Grandma's in a nursing home*

### Asthma

Ostrow, W., & Ostrow, V. *All about asthma*

### Attitude adjustment

Isami, I. *The fox's egg*

### Birth

Girard, L. *You were born on your very first birthday*

### Blindness

Martin, B., Jr. *Knots on a counting rope*

Ford, P. *Redbird* (in Braille)

Litchfield, A. *A cane in her hand*

**Bullies**

- Mayer, M. *Just a daydream*  
 Naylor, P. *King of the playground*  
 Jamar, E. *It happened at Cecilia's*  
 Shura, M. *Polly panic*

**Cancer**

- Grant, C. *Phoenix rising*  
 Lancaster, M. *Hang tough*  
 Vigna, J. *When Eric's mom fought cancer*

**Cerebral palsy**

- Fassler, J. *Howie helps himself*  
 Emmert, M. *I'm the big sister now*

**Child abuse**

- Stanek, M. *Don't hurt me, mama*

**Day care**

- Simon, N. *I'm busy too*  
 Tompert, A. *Will you come back for me?*

**Deafness**

- Guccione, L. *Tell me how the wind sounds*  
 Booth, B. *Mandy*  
 Litchfield, A. *A button in her ear; Words in our hands*  
 Aseltine, L. *I'm deaf and it's okay*

**Death/Dying**

- Smith, D. *A taste of blackberries*  
 Lowry, L. *A summer to die*  
 Green, C. *Beat the turtle drum*  
 Lee, V. *The magic moth*  
 Clover, V. *Grover*  
 Simon, N. *The saddest time*  
 Blume, J. *Tiger eyes*

**Disabilities**

- Hamm, D. *Grandma drives a motor bed*  
 Henriod, L. *Grandma's wheelchair*  
 Lasker, J. *He's my brother*  
 Fassler, J. *Howie helps himself*  
 Lasker, J. *Nick joins in*  
 Powers, M. *Our teacher's in a wheelchair*  
 Muldoon, K. *Princess pooh*

**Divorce**

- Pascal, F. *The big camp secret*  
Danziger, P. *The divorce express*  
Wood, P. *Win me and you lose*  
Girard, L. *At daddy's on Saturdays*  
Cleary, B. *Dear Mr. Henshaw*  
Blume, J. *It's not the end of the world*

**Down's Syndrome**

- Rabe, B. *Where's chimpy?*  
Litchfield, A. *Making room for Uncle Joe*

**Dreams**

- Aylesworth, J. *The bad dream*

**Drugs**

- Hahn, M. *The dead man in Indian Creek*

**DUI**

- Strasser, T. *The accident*  
Deaver, J. *Say goodnight, Gracie*

**Emotions/Feelings**

- Hazen, B. *The knight who was afraid of the dark*  
Simon, N. *How do I feel?; I am not a crybaby*  
Stanton, E., & Stanton, H. *Sometimes I like to cry*

**Emotional illness**

- Greenberg, H. *Emotional illness in your family: Helping your relative, helping yourself*

**Failing a grade**

- Aseltine, L. *First grade can wait*

**Families**

- Simon, N. *All kinds of families; Wedding days*  
Delton, J. *My mom hates me in January*

**Friendship**

- O'Conner, J., & O'Conner, J. *Slime time*  
Singer, M. *Twenty ways to lose your best friend*

**Homelessness**

- Bunting, E. *Fly away home*  
Sauer, J. *Hank*

Grove, V. *The fastest friend in the west*

Seymour-Jones, C. *Homelessness*

Chalofsky, F., Finland, G., & Wallace, J. *Changing places — a kid's view of shelter living*

Thiel, E. *The polka dot horse*

Hahn, M. *December stillness*

### **Illiteracy**

Bunting, E. *The Wednesday surprise*

Stanek, M. *My mom can't read*

### **Inadequacy**

Roos, S. *My horrible secret*

### **Latchkey children**

Stanek, M. *All alone after school*

### **Learning disabilities**

Lasker, J. *He's my brother*

### **Loneliness**

Byars, B. *The TV kid*

Greene, C. *The unmaking of rabbit*

Rinkoff, B. *The watchers*

### **Maturation**

Peck, R. *A day no pigs would die*

Lee, M. *The skating rink*

### **Medical conditions**

Krementz, J. *How it feels to fight for your life*

### **Moving**

Rabe, B. *A smooth move*

### **New parents**

MacLachlan, P. *Sarah, plain and tall*

### **New siblings**

Bogart, J.E. *Daniel's dog*

Wittman, S. *Jessie's wishes*

Lowry, L. *Anastasia Krupnic*

L'Engle, M. *Meet the Austins*

### **Nuclear war**

Vigna, J. *Nobody wants a nuclear war*

**Peer pressure**

Spinelli, J. *Fourth grade rats*

**Poverty**

Pfeffer, S. *Kid power*

Stolz, M. *Noonday friends*

Clear, V. *Where the lilies bloom*

**Protection and safety**

Stanek, M. *All alone after school; Don't hurt me, mama*

Girard, L. *My body is private*

**Racial issues**

Neufield, J. *Edgar Allen*

Rinkoff, B. *Member of the gang*

Taylor, M. *Roll of thunder, hear my cry*

**Relationships**

Leverich, K. *Best enemies*

Betancourt, J. *Not just partygirls*

**Religious differences**

Lowry, L. *Number the stars*

Friedman, I. *The other victims: First person stories of non-Jews persecuted by the Nazis*

Sachs, M. *Peter and Veronica*

**Retarded siblings**

Friis-Baastad, B. *Don't take Teddy*

Cleaver, B. *Me, too*

Byars, B. *Summer of the swans*

**Self-esteem**

DeFelice, C. *Weasel*

Mendez, P. *The black snowman*

Simon, N. *Why am I different?*

**Self-identification**

Rathman, P. *Ruby the copycat*

Coryell, S. *Eaglebait*

Ferris, J. *Looking for home*

**Sex role**

Zolotow, C. *William's doll*

**Shyness**

Martin, A. *Stage fright*

Pfeffer, S. *What do you do when your mouth won't open*

**Sibling rivalry**

Blume, J. *The pain and the great one*

Kropff, P. *Moonkid and liberty*

Bulla, C. *The Christmas coat*

Lowry, L. *A summer to die*

**Values**

Pfeffer, S. *Courage, Dana*

Hinton, S.E. *The outsiders*



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